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AUTHOR Meredith, William H.; Rowe, George P.
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ABSTRACT

Because of the knowledge explosion in the field of gerontology and the increased coverage of the field in the popular press, a study was conducted to determine how accurate older adults and gerontologists think newspaper stories about aging are. A convenience sample of 95 persons in the midwest over 65 years old--similar to national demographic data in terms of age, sex, and marital status, but better educated--and 78 midwestern faculty members interested in gerontology reacted to 17 statements presented in nationally syndicated newspaper articles as facts about aging. The elderly persons and the professors disagreed about the classification of older persons by age, with the elderly opting for classification by state of health or economic status while the professionals held to age categories. Three quarters of the older persons believed that illnesses are caused by elderly persons not keeping busy, while less than one quarter of the professionals agreed. In addition, 91 percent of the professionals, as opposed to 38 percent of the older persons, agreed that older persons have interest in continued sexual activity. Both groups agreed that senior citizens are relatively healthy and that being active slows the aging process, and both saw isolation and economics as prevalent concerns. Since both groups agreed on the accuracy of all but one newspaper statement included in the survey, it appears that journalists are doing a good job in reporting gerontology news. However, as one of the most important sources of education for both the elderly and the general public, journalists should get background information from both gerontologists and the elderly in preparing their articles. (KC)

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OLDER ADULTS, GERONTOLOGISTS, AND NEWSPAPER
REPORTING: EDUCATIONAL IMPLICATIONS

William H. Meredith
Instructor
Human Development and the Family
A & SH 106
University of Nebraska - Omaha
Omaha, Nebraska 68182
(402) 554-2351

George P. Rowe
Associate Professor
Human Development and the Family
RLH 104D
University of Nebraska - Lincoln
Lincoln, Nebraska 68503
(402) 472-1655

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BIODATA

William H. Meredith is an Instructor in the Department of Human Development and the Family at the University of Nebraska - Lincoln. He received a Masters in Family and Child Development from Kansas State in 1971 and a Masters of Social Work in 1979 from the University of Nebraska. He is currently working on his doctorate. Mr. Meredith has just completed a research project investigating the needs and coping mechanisms of Indo-chinese refugees in Nebraska. Shortly Mr. Meredith plans to begin a research study on the Indochinese refugee elderly.

George P. Rowe is Associate Professor in the Department of Human Development and the Family at the University of Nebraska - Lincoln where he teaches graduate courses in Gerontology and Family Studies. He received his Masters degree in 1954 from the University of Missouri and his Ph.D. from the University of Florida in 1966. Dr. Rowe is currently analyzing data of intimacy networks and marital satisfaction on a sample of 71 couples married 25 years or longer. He has also recently been the principle investigator in research studying the perception of retirement by workers and retirees from state government service.

OLDER ADULTS, GERONTOLOGISTS, AND
NEWSPAPER REPORTING: EDUCATIONAL IMPLICATIONS

A gerontology information barrage has inundated the mass media in recent years reflecting our national concern with the "graying of America". Part of this media blitz may have been a response to correct what Lou Harris and Associates (1975) have called a distorted image of older Americans held by the public at large. This largely negative stereotyped view has been denounced by gerontologists and many older persons themselves.

Just as the mass media has perpetrated these myths of aging in the past, the print media is beginning to disseminate research findings to the general public. Schwartz and Peterson (1975) have reported that articles exploring in some depth substantive issues of aging are appearing with greater frequency in metropolitan dailies.

The general public has reacted favorably to the reporting of new findings on aging. Lou Harris and Associates (1975) found that 68% of their national probability sample thought that newspapers presented a fair picture of what older persons are like. Wilson and Howard (1978) reported that 74% of those interviewed in a Canadian city perceived that newspapers were either somewhat or very accurate. Therefore, newspaper reporting exerts a powerful influence over readers.

How accurately do the elderly and gerontologists find newspaper reporting to be? How similar are the two groups in their perceptions? What adult educational implications do these results suggest?

METHODS

Ninety-five persons in their later years (past 65) and 78 midwestern faculty members who have gerontology as their area of interest responded to seventeen statements presented in nationally syndicated newspaper articles as facts about aging. The seventeen statements were randomly selected from a larger number of articles printed within the time frame of several months. Respondents were asked to react to statements listed in Table I according to a five point continuum: strongly agree, agree, no opinion, disagree, and strongly disagree. For purposes of analysis these were combined into agree, disagree and no opinion. Comments were encouraged. While the group of older persons was a convenience sample, it closely paralleled national demographic data reported by the National Council on Aging (1978) in terms of age, sex, and marital status. However, this sample from three midwestern states was better educated than elderly in general. (Rabuskha and Jacobs, 1980).

FINDINGS

The responses of the elderly and the professors are reported in Table I. Statements discussed first in this section are those in which the majority of the older persons disagreed with the majority of the professors. Statements that found agreement between the majority of the two groups are discussed at the end of the section.

Place Table I about here

Elderly and Professors Disagree

One area of disagreement between the two groups concerned the classification of older persons by age (Statement 3) as opposed to classification on the basis of health and economic status (Statement 13). The professionals were inclined to support age classifications. Some viewed the first method as too simplistic and limiting. However, 84% of older adults felt classification should be done on the basis of health and financial status. One elderly respondent stated, "Age depends on mental outlook and physical health, not years". Another wrote, "Some that are 80 are younger than those in their 60's and 70's"

Three quarters of the older persons believed that illnesses are caused as a result of elderly persons not keeping busy (Statement 4). Less than one quarter of the gerontologists agreed. They saw little connection between illness and prior activity level.

Ninety-one percent of the professionals agreed that older persons have interest in continued sexual activity (Statement 7). Only 38% of persons over 56 marked the agree category. One 89 year old man wrote "Interested but age limits activity. More talk than do." One of the few gerontologists to disagree with the item wrote, "I agree to some extent but I do think that while before we considered them to be asexual, now they are expected to be sexual athletes. Both views are incorrect and exaggerated." The 'no opinion' response was not often chosen by either group in this survey instrument. However, on this statement, 39% of the persons over 65 marked 'no opinion'. Several comments that expressed this answer well were "None of your business", and "My husband and I are

in no hurry to stop, but I haven't the foggiest about anyone else." Fifty-six percent of the widows gave 'no opinion' as their reply.

Forty-one percent of professors felt that a majority of retirees would rather be working (Statement 11) as compared to 63% of the older adults. Many in both groups qualified their positive answers with the mention of part-time work.

Twice as many professionals as lay persons agreed senility infrequently occurs among the elderly (Statement 12). Many of the professionals stated that this was a common area of misdiagnosis. Comments from the elderly included, "Very few escape either physical or mental senility at some point", and "in the old, old group".

The professors were evenly split concerning the extent of depression among older adults (Statement 14). Fifty-nine percent of the older persons agreed with the statement. One of the professionals commented, "Much more prevalent than acknowledged by health professionals."

Sixty-nine percent of the professors saw the family as providing for more of the health and social service needs of the elderly than does the government (Statement 15). Only 40% of the senior citizens agreed. One lay respondent wrote, "When I was a child, it was the family, but more and more it is left up to the government". One senior citizen stated, "Many times friends provide more than anyone else". Considerable sentiment was expressed that the family should provide these services.

Elderly and Professors Agree

Both groups agreed that senior citizens are a relatively healthy group (Statement 1). However, few saw senior citizens as being the least

lonely age group (Statement 2). Isolation (Statement 5) and economic concerns (Statement 8) were seen as problem areas for the elderly.

The elderly and the professors both believed that being active tended to slow the mental and aging process (Statement 6). One professor stated, "The aging process is predetermined. However, activity involvement may delay effects. Use it or lose it." Both groups responded that only a small percentage of the population over 65 showed some mental deterioration (statement 9).

IMPLICATIONS

Newspapers provide a much used form of informal adult education. Their influence is widespread. Therefore it is important that older persons and gerontologists alike view most newspaper statements concerning the later years as being accurate. These two groups should have the best perspective on aging. Both groups together disagreed on but one newspaper statement included in the survey. Apparently many of the findings from gerontological research are being disseminated through the newspapers accurately based on the perceptions of the two samples.

Although journalists have been given a rather high rating by the respondents, there were several instances in which their reporting may have left questions open to interpretation. Newspaper stories often highlight only a few findings from research or print a quotation from a leading gerontologist without giving the full context of the topic. This leads to a rather simplistic or reductionistic conclusion. Journalists often need assistance in interpreting the gerontological knowledge explosion. Professors should take the time to provide background information to journalists

who have been assigned to write a story from a wire report. Older persons can likewise assist by providing a local color to a national news release. When gerontologists and older persons cooperate with journalists in this manner newspapers will become a more effective adult education media.

A person's perception of a newspaper story tends to color one's interpretation. Academic gerontologists view a newspaper account in the context of the credibility of the researcher being reported and whether the findings support the general knowledge in the field. Older persons look upon news stories from the perspective of their own aging experiences and whether it fits their reality. An implication for adult education classes, then, is the need for the professors to bring older persons to their classes to describe the actual experiences of growing older. These first hand accounts can then be discussed in terms of theoretical knowledge. Elderly persons, on the other hand, need the expertise of gerontologists to help them make sense out of their particular encounter with the aging process. Both groups can help each other and in the process greatly enhance the learning experience for all students.

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TABLE I

PERCENTAGE OF AGREEMENT AND DISAGREEMENT WITH NEWSPAPER
STATEMENTS BY PROFESSORS AND OLDER PERSONS

	Group	Agree	Disagree	No Opinion
1. In general, senior citizens are a relatively healthy group.	O P	77 82	14 10	9 8
2. Senior citizens, on the whole are the least lonely age group.	O P	35 12	58 81	7 8
3. Persons in their later years should be classified into two groups: the young old (65-80) and the old old (over 80).	O P	45 58	45 28	11 14
4. Many of the illnesses among the elderly are caused because they don't keep busy.	O P	75 22	7 69	19 9
5. Isolation is a major problem for senior citizens	O P	70 70	6 23	24 6
6. Being active in the community tends to slow the mental and aging process.	O P	71 70	27 18	3 13
7. The majority of older persons are interested in continued sexual activity.	O P	38 91	22 3	39 6
8. Economic problems are the greatest problems for people in their later years.	O P	67 71	23 22	9 8
9. Only a small percentage of the total population over 65 shows some mental deterioration, such as partial memory loss.	O P	64 83	30 13	6 4
10. The rate of aging is dependent to a large part on heredity and to a lesser extent, on environmental factors like diet, smoking and	O P	43 49	47 40	10 12
11. A majority of retirees would rather be working	O P	63 41	31 45	6 14

TABLE I (continued)

	Group	Agree	Disagree	No Opinion
12. Senility is <u>not</u> a very common ailment of the elderly	O P	43 88	45 8	12 4
13. People in their later years represent two distinct groups:				
1. Those who are healthy vigorous, and contributing, and	O P	84 41	9 43	7 17
2. Those who because of health and/or money problems have withdrawn from the mainstream of life.				
14. Depression (low spirits, a feeling of hopelessness) is a major ailment of older adults.	O P	59 42	33 42	9 15
15. The family, rather than governmental agencies and professionals provide more of the life-long health and social service needs for the elderly.	O P	40 69	48 24	12 6
16. The elderly are easy marks for peddlers and many other rip-offs.	O P	77 68	15 18	9 13
17. The death rate might rise sharply for people in the three to four years after retirement because older people become more depressed about joblessness, tight budgets, boredom and a sense of uselessness.	O P	65 53	29 34	6 13

O = Older persons 65 years and older (n = 95)

P = Professors who teach Gerontology courses (n = 78)